



What is American poetry?

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of American poetry.

Keywords

Native American, colonist, poetry, war, independence, Transcendentalist

American poetry is a broad categorical description that encompasses the poetry of the United States of America. Generally, American poetry refers to a period of time that begins with the first colonists to the present day. However, it is important to acknowledge that Native American oral traditions included art forms similar to poetry long before European colonists inhabited the continent.

As previously mentioned, American poetry is understood to have originated with the first European colonists in the American continent and persists to the present day. Given that European colonists began arriving in the 1400s, this means we have over 600 centuries of poetic history to cover! Let's start at the beginning with Colonial Poetry.

Colonial poetry in the history of American poetry refers to verses written by the European colonists on the American continent. From the beginning of the European colonization of America, the colonists would attach verse poetry in their letters back to their families and friends across the pond. Much of the published writing during this period was informative

prose pieces that painted a picture of the new territories for a European audience. Poetry from the early colonial period in the 16th-17th centuries tended to be verses interspersed in longer prose pieces that had a similar goal: to inform their target audience. Much of this poetry was also religious, given that many of the first colonists were religious settlers.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, popular poetry began to reflect the political fervor of the American War of Independence. Poetry became a political as well as an artistic form of expression as poets recognized the extraordinary times they were living in and the power of their pens. During the American Revolution, poems of this time extolled the values of independence and freedom while valorizing American war heroes, such as in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1807-1882) 'Paul Revere's Ride' (1860) that commemorated this event of the War of Independence. Many people associate a secluded cabin in the woods with Transcendentalism, a literary and philosophical movement that began in the 1830s.

Although having a relatively brief heyday, Transcendentalism continues to live on in the minds of writers of today, making it one of the most influential periods in American literature. In September 1836, a group of prominent ministers, reformists, and writers gathered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to plan a symposium around the state of present-day American thought. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would become the leading man of the Transcendentalist movement, was in attendance at this first meeting. The club became a regular occurrence (soon called "The Transcendentalist Club"), with more members attending each meeting. At first created to protest the dull intellectual climate of Harvard and Cambridge, the meetings formed as a result of the members' common dissatisfaction with religion, literature, and politics at the time. These meetings became a forum to discuss radical social and political ideas. Special topics included women's suffrage, anti-slavery and abolitionism, American Indian rights, and utopian society.

The last meeting of the Transcendentalist Club was in 1840. Shortly thereafter, *The Dial*, a magazine centering on Transcendentalist ideas, was founded. It would run essays and reviews in religion, philosophy, and literature until 1844. Although the most famous works in Transcendentalist literature are non-fiction, Transcendentalist literature spanned all genres, from poetry to short fiction, and novels. Here are some key characteristics you will find in Transcendentalist literature.

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Transcendentalism is an approach to philosophy, art, literature, spirituality, and a way of living. A group of writers and other intellectuals started what became known as the "Transcendental Club" in 1836. Lasting until 1840, these club meetings focused on new ways of thinking and orienting one's self in the

world. First and foremost, Transcendentalism emphasizes intuition and personal knowledge and resists conformity to social norms. Transcendentalist writers and thinkers believe individuals are inherently good. Everyone has the power to "transcend" the chaos of society and use their own intellect for finding a sense of greater meaning and purpose.

Transcendentalists believe in the power of the human spirit. Through the Transcendentalist view, the individual is capable of experiencing a direct relationship with the divine. In their mind, organized, historical churches are not necessary. One can experience divinity through contemplation of nature. With a return to simplicity and a focus on everyday situations, they can enhance their spiritual lives.

Another major theme in Transcendentalism is self-reliance. Just as the individual can experience the divine without needing a church, the individual must also avoid conformity and instead rely on their own instincts and intuition.

Gothic writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville saw the potential for evil in every individual. Their literature focused on the darker side of human nature, such as betrayal, greed, and the capacity for evil. Much of the literature contained the demonic, grotesque, mythical, irrational, and fantastical, which is still popular today.

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